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ABSTRACT

Language is both a reflection of the status quo and a factor in perpetuating the status quo. People use language to encode their own experiences; memories are the encoded versions of reality. People learn how to characterize their experience by seeing how others characterize their own and others' experiences. When asked to talk about successful men and women, different words are typically used to describe the behaviors associated with men's versus women's success (such as, men are "ambitious," women are "power hungry"). Besides the different emotional reactions to different words and phrases, part of the process of encoding experiences involves expressing attributions of motives and abilities. Looking at how people talk about achievement gives others a window into their motivational systems. Individuals use language as it has been modeled to them to encode their experiences and then those encodings become reality. Language that reflects the status quo then influences how they think and behave. By listening closely to examples of the language women and girls use to describe their achievements, a better understanding of the relationship between language, thought, and achievement behavior can be gained. (MG)

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The Language of Achievement

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Language is both a reflection of the status quo and a factor in perpetuating the status quo. The mechanisms by which language can shape our thoughts are many. Most obviously, language spoken to us or about us affects how we feel about ourselves. But equally important, we use language to encode our own experiences. Our memories, then, are the encoded versions of reality. We may feel angry now, but if we tell ourselves we feel enraged, then years later the experience we will remember is rage. Our experiences shape our behavior, but it is the way we describe and interpret our experiences that matters--not the objective experience. Thus, having made an A in calculus may not be the experience that shapes our beliefs about our math abilities. Rather, the "story" we told ourselves and others about that A determines the set of attributions we make about our abilities: "I lucked out." "The instructor liked me." "I worked incredibly hard, but don't really have any math ability." "The teacher overlooked some of my errors." "My boyfriend tutored me." These "stories" become the truth--not that A in calculus.

We, of course, learn how to characterize our experience by seeing how others characterize their and our experiences. If we hear other women trivialize their success, we will follow suit. If we hear other women blame themselves for failure, then we come to believe that that is the appropriate story about our own failures. It has been well documented that men and women both interpret successes and failures differently for men versus women: men's successes tend to be attributed more to ability, women's more to luck; men's failures tend to be attributed more to bad luck, women's to lack of ability. A man's ability leads to his success; women's success is more likely to be luck.

In my classes, I ask students to report, anonymously, what others say about their academic success. While many women do report that significant others are supportive and positive, others report ego-damaging comments, such as "A lot of people must have done well," "Why can't you do well in ALL your courses?" Many comments are of the "that's great, but..." variety: "That's great, but what about all the time the kids spent with a baby-sitter?" Or, "That's great, but what about next semester when I'll be busier at my job and won't have time to help with the housework?" Or, "That's great, but it's

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only a class." It should come as no surprise, that the same women downgrade their success: "I only did well because the test was unusually easy." Or, "I did well on this exam, but it's not important." Sometimes, I ask students to tell me about a time when they were successful in their jobs or in their academic careers; then to tell me about a spouse's or significant others' success. Again, the same patterns emerge: some women trivialize their successes and attribute their success to luck while aggrandizing their husband/lover's successes. But even more worrisome is that women can instantly think of many examples of their men's success and frequently have trouble coming up with any examples of their own successes.

Women's successes are often viewed as unimportant and exceptions to the general rule, while their failures are often viewed as important and representative of their low ability. Hence, the test is unimportant and "only a test" when a woman does well, but the test is important and "a measure of ability" when the woman does poorly. Thus, when a woman does poorly on an exam, her husband might suggest she drop out of school; when she does well, she receives a left-handed compliment.

What is especially interesting is the subtlety and variety of ways these messages are conveyed. Sometimes, these negative messages are delivered as support: "Honey, this is too hard for you. Why put yourself through all this work? I love you just the way you are." Or, "You're doing great in school, but it's more important for you to spend time with the family." Still other "supportive" comments are juxtaposed with implied criticism: "Hmm, that's great. Oh, are we having fast food again tonight?" Or, "Hmm, that's great. Oh, I noticed the laundry hasn't been done in a while."

When asked to talk about successful men and women, different words are typically used to describe the behaviors associated with men's versus women's success: Men are ambitious, women are power hungry; men are firm, women are stubborn; men are committed to their careers, women neglect their families; men are attentive to details, women are picky; men are stern taskmasters, women are bitchy; men are confident, women are conceited.

Most of us are aware of sexist language such as using 'he' to refer to both men and women: if teachers refer to physicians as 'he,' children will assume physicians are male and this may inhibit female

achievement. But, as the above example demonstrates, language also conveys very different emotions depending on the words we choose to describe a situation. R. Lakoff (1975) makes this point clearly with the difference between a "woman artist" and a "lady artist." 'Woman' and 'lady' both refer to the same people, but if we use "lady," her work sounds trivial. A "lady" artist does it as a hobby much as a "gentleman farmer" is someone who only plays at farming. Heaven help the attorney who thinks of herself as a "lady lawyer."

Besides the different emotional reactions to different words and phrases, part of the process of encoding our experiences involves expressing, often implicitly, attributions of motives and abilities. Once we have encoded our success as luck, it matters little whether or not luck was involved: future decisions, level of aspirations, motivation, expectations of success will be based on our memory of that time "I was lucky and succeeded." So looking at how people talk about achievement gives us a window into their motivational systems. They use language as it has been modelled to them to encode their experiences and then those encodings become reality. Language that reflects the status quo then influences how they think and behave.

By listening closely to examples of the language women and girls use to describe their achievements, we can gain a better understanding of the relationship between language, thought, and achievement behavior. It is too simplistic to say, for example, that girls don't achieve as much in math because they've been "told" they can't. The situation is much more complex. Even when girls do well and receive positive feedback, they may use different language to encode the events and hence, achieve less because they use words to devalue their success and then come to believe what they told themselves Their own words become their reality.

I see this most clearly with mature women students. On the first day of class, we typically introduce ourselves. Invariably there's a mature woman in the group who tells us all she's inadequate academically. Before anyone has had a chance to react to her classroom performance, she describes herself as someone who is struggling to get through school, who would like to go on to graduate school, but probably won't make it, someone who probably shouldn't be here but whose husband is humoring her by letting her go to school, someone who is embarrassing her children by going to school, etc. Often, this is the person who tops the class. Why does she, then,

act so surprised when I praise her success? Because she believes that her good performance (in this class and her other classes) is just a fluke--that one poor grade she made on one pop quiz three semesters ago tells the true story. With effort, I might get her to accept that she is successful. Often, however, that is not enough: "Yeah, I'm successful, but it's only school; it's not important."

What kind of feedback will help to alter these negative stories? Most importantly, praise has to indicate that this good work is representative of a general ability to do good work. "This is a great paper--You always do such fine work." Second, praise has to make explicit the connection between the successful performance and her efforts and ability. "Your hard work resulted in a fine paper." "You have a real talent for expressing yourself." Third, the woman needs to be convinced that her achievements are important. Fourth, in order to change the woman's self-defeating story, you need to find out the particular story she tells herself, then explicitly offer specific disconfirming evidence. Fifth, you have to do the first four things a lot.

Reference

Lakoff, R.T. (1975). Language and woman's place. New York: Harper & Row.